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ABSTRACT

Thirteen children's books with tragic themes are discussed in this paper. The introductory section offers definitions of tragedy and melodrama and discusses the issue of the appropriateness of tragic themes in children's stories. Six books are then discussed in which child characters must try to deal with the death of a sibling, a parent, grandparent, or a friend; all the books are said to end with an affirmation of life. The remaining seven books that are examined encompass themes involving dissatisfaction with a character's life as it exists, due to such circumstances as the sadness of an aged grandparent, the abandonment of a friend by her mother, abandonment by one's own father, physical handicaps, and classmates' cruelty. (GW)

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TRAGIC THEMES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS: How Universal Themes of Death and Deprivation are Dealt With in Children's Books Today

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by

DayAnn McClenathan

"Tragedy," Aristotle tells us in the Poetics,

> "is a representation of an action, which is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain length; it is expressed in speech made beautiful in different ways; ... and by exciting pity and fear it gives a healthy relief to such emotions." Thus he states in due logical order, first, what tragedy is and represents; secondly, the form it employs; thirdly, the manner in which it is communicated; and, lastly, the function it fulfils."[1]

At the outset of our investigation of tragic elements in children's books, it is perhaps useful to remember that, for the ancient Greeks, tragedy need not end in disaster. It must include scenes of pain and sorrow, but it need not close with one, though it usually did. The essence of tragedy was that it handled serious actions of serious characters, whereas comedy dealt grotesquely with the grotesque.

In the Middle Ages "tragedy" curiously changed meaning. Its connection with the stage was forgotten and the unhappy ending became essential.

Donato[2] suggests that even if one subscribes to the Aristotelian description of tragedy, the so-called tragic elements in recent children's books more authentically represent characteristics of melodrama in the theater. Indeed, the following principles of melodrama detailed by Wright in his comparison of it with tragedy would appear to apply to all of the works to be analyzed in this paper:

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Requirements of Melodrama

1. It treats of a serious subject.
2. The characters are more loosely drawn than in tragedy, and this makes it easier for the audience to identify itself with the characters, thus creating a stronger empathic response.
3. Whereas tragedy must be absolutely honest, the element of chance enters into the melodrama. It is episodic and the most exciting incidents possible are brought into the play.
4. There may be an emotion of pity, but it borders on sentimentality. Fear may be evident, but it is of a more temporary or surface type.
5. There is no real enlightenment even in defeat, and in most instances the protagonist does win his battle.[3]

However, it is not our intent to belabor definition. Since tragedy as a term is generally understood, and the universal themes of death and deprivation investigated here will be thought of as tragic circumstances, the original definition of tragedy will be invoked, and with Lucas we will agree to accept that "Tragedy,...is simply one fruit of the human instinct to tell stories, to reproduce and recast experience. And since experience is often sad, so are its copies."[4]

Why is it even appropriate to direct our attention to tragic themes in children's stories?

Kingston reminds us that

> There are two schools of thought about tragedy in children's stories. Traditional feeling dictated that the very young and even eight- to twelve-year olds should not find unhappiness in books, because adulthood with its serious troubles comes all too soon. A newer and less restrictive view is seen in many recent children's stories. Adherents of this second school believe in early exposure to life's rawness with few holds barred. But there is a middle ground-writing for children that follows the pattern set by great literary tragedies, yet is appropriate for its special audience, and grapples with problems of life, ending in affirmation.[5]

Kingston, in her study, The Tragic Mode in Children's Literature, delineates a series of tragic essences made manifest in stories of rejection, entrapment, sensitivity, war and loss. Although Kingston's schema was entirely appropriate for use in a book on the subject, time dictates that I must focus on an entirely different form of classification. Of the many books read for this investigation which purported to involve tragic themes, all seemed to fall into two categories: A. Themes which treat of a threat to or change in the course of life's patterns; and B. Themes which involve dissatisfaction with one's life as it exists. Stories in Category A all involve death in some way; stories in Category B involve deprivation of essences other than life: security, self-respect and the respect of others, belongingness, and in some cases the loss or deprivation of the most fundamental of physical necessities.

A discussion about why tragic themes such as these are more prevalent in children's books today than in the past is not within the purview of this discussion, and a discussion does not constitute a personal endorsement. What I intend to do is explore existing tragic themes with you through an analysis of the books themselves. Not all resolve the problems of their protagonists; but in the most optimistic literary tradition, each ends on a hopeful note; and although the characters experience feelings of fear, frustration, grief, perplexity, denial, anger, guilt, depression, resentment and loneliness, all undergo some meaningful, personal inner resolution by story's end.

The stories in Category A include The Magic Moth, A Summer To Die, Annie and the Old One, Beat the Turtle Drum, Unleaving, and The Sound of Chariots.

Several of these books deal in detail with the death of a sibling. In The Magic Moth by Virginia Lee, six-year-old Mark-O has a 10-year-old sister who is dying at home. An operation has been unsuccessful, and she has been confined to bed for a year. Parents and doctor prepare other children in the family for their sister's impending death.

A young person's death is a difficult theme to portray to youngsters. The author weaves a powerful story geared to helping a 6-year-old understand the mystery of death, especially an untimely death.

When Mark-O (Oliver) has been told that 10-year-old Maryanne is going to die, he crawls into her bedroom. "He thought that if he pretended he was a cat no one would notice. No one did. He wanted to look at Maryanne when she didn't know he was looking. He wanted to see if she really looked like someone who was going to die." He had a guinea pig that had died, but he had been given a new one. "But when Mark-O looked at Maryanne, he thought, I don't see how we could find another Maryanne. He felt terrible."

Mark-O asks many questions about what is going to happen to Maryanne. He asks his brother if she's going to come back. "Well, no, she won't. But where she is going it will be nice." His sister tells him that "... if you bury something it just becomes part of the ground after a while."

Mark-O begins to take little presents to Maryanne nearly every day. A pretty rock one day, a drawing he made the next. She'd make up little stories about her gifts. Next to her bed was a brillian red and green caterpillar in a jar. "...and every day she expected to see a butterfly come out." She never does. One evening, "They all went in and stood around the bed. Maryanne looked just as she had before dinner. But there was a strange feeling in the room. It was like the feeling you get in your stomach when you are waiting for the dentist." All the children kiss her.

"He went back to the foot of the bed. It was so silent you could hear Maryanne's breathing, even though it was very soft now. Mark-O thought everyone else had stopped breathing, and he even thought he had. Suddenly, Maryanne was not breathing.....Everyone moved slowly, like statues that had become alive. A huge white moth rose gently from somewhere near the bed and flew to the ceiling. It fluttered around for a few seconds, found the window, which Mother had just opened, and glided out into the night." Later, their mother explains that Mark-O's gift, the caterpillar, had hatched in the heat of the bedroom.

All the family attend the funeral service. "And there was a strange white box right in the middle in front of the altar.....Mark-O was going to ask what was in it, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew." Then the hearse, the cemetery, and the burial bring tears and a deep hurt. The author tells us that life gones on, but changes.

Facing death is also a slow process in A Summer to Die by Lois Lowry. Meg Chalmers has a grip on nothing. Her 15-year-old sister Molly had a grip on a boy - is going steady. Father has a grip on Coleridge - is writing a book. At 13, Meg is messy, uncertain of herself, and prone to envying her sister who is "..calm, easygoing, self-confident, downright smug." And Mother - "..always tries to make things right with gestures: hugs, quick kisses blown across a room, waves, winks, smiles. Sometimes it helps."

The family rents an old house in the country in order that the father may work on his book. He's an English professor at a university.

This story is told from the viewpoint of Meg, who is trying to become her own person one summer when tragedy strikes. Her sister suffers nosebleeds.

"My father was in the doorway of the bedroom, with Molly in his arms like a small child. There were towels already drenched with blood around her face and head; they had wrapped her in the blanket from her bed, and the blood was moving on it slowly." Molly returns home after the hospital, and Meg can't resist observing that she is unpleasant. "Part of why Molly is being so obnoxious, I think, is because she doesn't look good, and it was always so important to Molly to look pretty. But she lost weight..... so now her face is thinner than it used to be, and more pale.....Worst of all, for Molly, her hair is falling out."

"But now Mom doesn't chuckle and tease when Molly is awful. Dad doesn't lay down the law. Instead, Mom gets worried and confused, which makes things worse. Dad gets tense and silent and goes off to his study without saying anything. It's as if an upsetting stranger has moved in with us...."

Soon Molly was gone. "She just closed her eyes one afternoon and didn't ever open them again."

Meg experiences fright, guilt, denial and before acceptance, a sense of how unfair her sister's death is.

In Beat the Turtle Drum by Constance Greene, death is accidental. Joss eagerly awaits her eleventh birthday when she'll be able to rent a horse for a week. Kate her thirteen-year-old sister thinks Joss is her parents' favorite, yet they are good friends. Joss gets her horse, and one day she fears he's loose, climbs out on a tree limb to see, and falls to her death.

Kate reflects on what has happened:

"Nothing will ever be all right again. Joss is dead. They told us she had died instantly. Her neck was broken. There was nothing anyone

could have done." Kate goes to the funeral home. "It had become important that I go. I would never see Joss again.....I had never seen a coffin, but when I saw it I knew it was a coffin.....When I got up my nerve to look at her, Joss seemed to be smiling at me out from under her eyelids.....She looked happy and not at all dead. I was glad I'd seen her. If I'd never looked, I would've always been afraid of how it would be."

"It's a good thing something takes over and clouds your mind when someone you love dies," she says. Mother's cousin tells Kate to be good to her father and mother and that they'll need lots of love and patience. "I nodded. How about me?" Still thinking that Joss was the favorite daughter, Kate says "If I'd died instead of her, maybe they wouldn't feel so bad." A cousin answers, "I bet Joss would've felt the same way.....she might've said the same thing. And both of you would've been wrong. I think when a child dies, it's the saddest thing that could ever happen. And the next saddest is the way the brothers and sisters feel. They feel guilty..... here they are, alive, and the other one is dead."

Father takes Scotch and mother takes sleeping pills. Kate says, "I hear them pacing in the night.....I can't hear anything but dry crying..... Dry ones are done by people who have so much misery inside them it's like a desert. No oasis."

A letter from a teacher tries to ease Kate's sadness."...she said that right now it must seem as if there were no joy in the world. Maybe she's right that later on I'll get pleasure from my memories. But it's the right now that hurts," she reflects painfully.

In a less untimely but deeply poignant confrontation with death, Annie in Annie and the Old One by Miska Miles does what she thinks she must to forestall the inevitable.

Annie's Navajo grandmother has seen many harvestings and gathered much wisdom. Her face is a web of wrinkles, and she walks slowly. Annie listens to her stories of long ago and helps make fried bread. Theirs is a good world in a snug hogan on a low mesa. "Annie's Navajo world was good - a world of rippling sand, of high copper-red bluffs in the distance, of the low mesa near her own snug hogan. The pumpkins were yellow in the cornfield, and the tassels on the corn were turning brown."

One day, the Old One announces to the family, "My children, when the new rug is taken from the loom, I will go to Mother Earth." Annie looks at her mother. "Her mother's eyes were shining bright with tears that did not fall, and Annie knew what her grandmother meant. Her heart stood still and she made no sound." The mother explains to Annie. "Your grandmother is one of those who live in harmony with all nature - with earth, coyote, birds in the sky. They know more than many will ever learn. Those Old Ones know."

Annie finds her mother helping weave the new rug. "Her grandmother would go back to the earth when the rug was taken from the loom," she thinks. "The rug must not be finished. Her mother must not weave." At night Annie releases the sheep. "Now her family would hunt the sheep all day. This would be a day when her mother would not weave."

Her grandmother is sensitive toward Annie's complex feelings. "My granddaughter," she said, "you have tried to hold back time. This cannot be done.....The sun comes up from the edge of earth in the morning. It returns to the edge of earth in the evening. Earth, from which good things come for the living creatures on it. Earth, to which all creatures finally go."

At the end, Annie finally understands. She takes her grandmother's old weaving stick and starts to weave on the partly-completed rug. "She picked up a strand of gray wool and started to weave," is the concluding sentence.

Bridie in The Sound of Chariots by Mollie Hunter experiences fear, anger, denial, and depression while trying to accept her father's death. All this causes a tumultuous growing-up period. Time and the wisdom of some adults help her mature and use her native talents, and inexorably the death of her father slowly awakens in Bridie an awareness and appreciation for life.

Her father had been a prisoner of war for two years, and his wounds had not received proper treatment. Bridie's mother wrote to him, after choosing his name from a "Prisoners of War" list. They fell in love through their letters. Her parent's interesting and complex life story inspired Bridie to write a book - The Man with a View of Heaven.

After her father's death, Bridie has dreams in which she imagines herself on the brink of death. All of this was occurring while Bridie was in the process of maturing and growing up and coincided with the onset of menstruation. "With fingers trembling so that they could hardly grip the stuff of her clothes she examined herself, and the first whimper of fear that broke from her at what she found grew into a panic-stricken shout.... "What's happened?"....."Did none of the girls ever tell you?" ... "There's nothing wrong with you. It happens to every girl at about your age" ..... "I won't have it!" Bridie thinks. "I won't let it happen to me!"... "Nobody likes it," she's told, "but there's nothing you can do to stop it. You just have to accept that you're grown-up now." However, "She was grown-up now but she still was feeling the same, thinking the same as she had always done. She would have to go on for the rest of her life thinking like this, running, running away from the sound of chariots, always afraid of Time catching up with her, of dying like her father had done."

In secondary school an English teacher tells her, "You are your father's daughter. He's in your brain and in your blood. Live for him! Don't let your talent die because he is dead. Let it flower from his death and speak for both of you!"

In Unleaving by Jill Paton Walsh, Madge rents her house by the sea to an Oxford professor, his family and students. She becomes friendly and likes one of his sons, Patrick. His sister, Molly, is mongoloid. "The child looks up. Its face is very ruddy, with almond-shaped pale blue eyes, and hardly any lashes. It smiles, and as it does so, the smile fills with spittle, which overflows and oozes down its chin. The eyes swim inward into a squint. Made sickens for an instant, then realizes, then covers up and steadies her smile."

Patrick is outraged at God. "If the universe is designed, then God; if God, then the universe is designed. If God, then things are deliberate. Someone looked at my mother, and decided to inflict upon Molly upon her... ...made Molly...purposely with no capacity for growth and little for happiness, and chose us for her kin. If God, he's a bloody bastard!"

Then one day, "up the path on the brink scramble Molly and Patrick. She is picking the thrift at the edge, brightly visible in her emerald-green dress. Patrick points; she leans out, stooping over the outermost clump pf flowers; and behind them both Madge and her brother Paul see Patrick's arm suddenly lifted, see him stretch out toward her as she falls."

Paul tells the police, "Patrick was walking with Molly along the cliff-edge path...We could see them ahead of us. Molly went very near the edge after some flowers growing there, and Patrick tried to grab her, but he just didn't catch her in time, and she fell off the edge."

Madge is miserable and confused, and dazed. Paul did not lie, she tells herself; he saw - since he says so - Patrick try to save Molly and fail. "But I saw Patrick push her over; there's no denying that's what I saw. And I can ask myself over and over if I'm not just nasty-minded, if Paul isn't probably right, and I know he isn't. He has such a loving nature, such an open, unclouded sort of mind, he would never see evil unless he had to." ... "But," she thinks,"I saw Patrick commit murder! and I lied about it. I said without hesitation that I had seen what Paul saw, and I will lie again, and again..."

For Madge, the revelation to herself is what Aristotle would consider her catharsis; but it is in the protection of Patrick that she maintains her own sanity and pursues a stable life.

All of these books which dealt with death ended with an affirmation of life. The stories in Category B - all of which encompass themes which involve dissatisfaction with one's life as it exists - have no such uniform message. In A Figure of Speech by Norma Fox Mazer, although there is a death, the theme is actually one of loss of an aging man's dignity and independence. Helped by a loving grandchild to regain what he has lost, a chain of events occur which lead to the grandfather's death, an end perhaps less tragic than the alternatives.

Thirteen-year-old Jenny Pennoyer has difficulty relating to her parents, but has a special loving relationship with her grandfather who lives in a basement apartment in Jenny's house where he moved after Jenny's grandmother died thirteen years earlier. At eighty-three, the years are beginning to take their toll on the man, with arthritis and other things beginning to ail him. When Jenny's brother quits college and brings a wife home to live, the Pennoyer house is more crowded than ever, and when

overcrowded conditions combine with the bride's coveting the little basement apartment, inevitable events begin to occur. Grandpa is first moved upstairs and then plans are made to put him in an old-age home. Grandpa decides to return to his farm (uninhabited all these years) and Jenny goes with him. The pair try against impossible odds to make the place livable. One stormy night, the discouraged old man goes out and lies down under an apple tree where Jenny finds him dead the next morning.

This passage reveals the depth of understanding Jenny and Grandpa shared:

> Neither of them had said it to the other, but they had both known they couldn't make it at the farm. Living there had been a fine, beautiful and impossible dream. There had been too much decay and destruction, and Grandpa had not had the strength left to cope with years of ruin. But rather than go back and let himself be put into a home, to sit all day in a numbered chair and look at pictures blinking across a TV screen, he had gone outside and gone to sleep. No, she mustn't say that. He had died. He had hated it when people didn't say what they meant, covering up a true word with a phony one. She seemed to hear him say in his harsh voice, I haven't gone to my final rest. I'm dead.
>
> She began school again, and walked every morning with Rhoda. After school, she played with Ethel, did homework, and helped her mother. On Saturdays she went to the movies, shared caramel corn with Rhoda, and shopped for shoes or a new skirt. After a while she was able to laugh at Ethel and elephant jokes, and everyone seemed pleased and relieved because she was being normal again.
>
> "She's gotten over it already," she heard her mother say to her father. "The young have short memories."

There is much beauty in this story with a special communication between the grandchild and grandfather, and much food for thought concerning a problem of growing universality in our culture, for which there seems to be no best solution.

In a tender story about elusive friendships called The Seven Stone by Mary Frances Shura, Tibbie copes with abandonment by her mother and Maggie strives to understand.

At school Maggie feels left out by the friends in her crowd. She meets the new girl in class, Tibbie, who wears a long dress, hiking boots, and believes in the power of her seven stone. Tibbie, who believes she is a witch, tells Maggie "Witches know a lot of things that regular people don't.....They believe that a little girl really gets a mind of her own when she gets to be seven years old. On her seventh birthday she gets a special stone and then she carries it always...." "I am always safe and lucky when I have it with me," she says. Tibbie is full of book knowledge and is quick to note that Maggie and she are the "only outsiders."

The group leader is almost dethroned by Tibbie as the champion speller of the class. During recess, the leader steps on Tibbie's long dress as she prepares to jump on the merry-go-round. Tibbie suffers a concussion.

Maggie finds out that, although Virginia is Tibbie's mother, Tibbie lives with Bill and Carole who take care of her. "Carole shook her head slowly. "Virginia is not dead, Maggie, just gone. Virginia is, well, she's different, and wonderful, and very restless. She went away one time and didn't come back." Carole paused to let Maggie understand. But Maggie didn't understand.

"But how could a mother just go away from a little girl?" she asked slowly, feeling a hollow place of fear deep inside.

"That's what Tibbie asks herself all the time, Maggie," Carole said gently. "And she can't accept that Virginia would leave her like that. That's why she studies more than she should, and wants to know more than anyone else even if it makes her lonely and disliked. She wants to be so good and so wonderful that Virginia will want her and come back."

"And you just take care of her?" Maggie asked, looking about at that marvelous room. "And love her like she was yours?"

"She is ours and we are hers," Carole said gently, "because we love her. Even as you are her friend and she is yours because you like each other."

Tibbie learns that her stone doesn't have special powers. Carole tells her that "it wasn't the stone that did the magic, it was the believing." Tibbie gives Maggie a seven stone as a reminder of their friendship and of "how great you were just being yourself."

The group leader never apologizes for her meanness, and the persistence of her unpleasant behavior saves this story from a saccharine ending.

Without Hats, Who Can Tell the Good Guys? by Mildred Ames has some similarities of theme.

Anthony Lang, Jr. (11 years old) dreams of living in his own home with his Dad and a housekeeper. He has been placed in a foster home with the Diamond family. Mr. Diamond, an ex-Navy man, seems domineering and a no-nonsense person. He says, "Might as well get our ship in order right away. You know, some people will tell you cleanliness is next to godliness..... I say order is next to godliness.....I don't put up with a lot of backtalk. You just keep your nose clean and mind the rules of the house and we'll get along fine."

About Mrs. Diamond---"For the first time, Anthony took a really good look at her. Patches of pink scalp showed through her limp, blond hair. And she was so skinny she sagged.....His mother was beautiful, and she was dead. Mrs. Diamond was homely, but she was alive. The lump in his stomach felt bigger than ever."

Their daughter, Hildy, also 11, seems insulting and defiant. She tells him, "For eleven, you're sure a shrimp."

The caseworker tries to help Anthony to look at his father for what he really is now. "First, he lost the good job (aeronautical engineer) he'd had for so many years. Then there was your mother's illness and death, and all the financial problems, hospital bills and other kinds... and having to sell the house to pay them. Your dad just couldn't seem to recover from all those hard blows. Some people never do, Anthony--even nice people like your father."

Yet Anthony would hold on to his dreams, tell himself that it happened a long time ago and now his father was really trying.

The Diamonds make him feel part of the family long before Anthony warms toward them. "Anthony still couldn't bring himself to call the man Dad. Yet Mr. Diamond had called Anthony his kid."

Anthony's father comes for a short visit. In a roundabout way he tells his son that he's working at a motel. He won't give him his address. "It's like this," he tells him, -"Ethel, the woman who owns the place - well, we have a few things in common." It seems that the things they have in common might be many. "A motel is no place for kids." Their conversation is uncomfortable for both of them, and Anthony detects that his father is not honest with him and catches "A faint but familiar" smell of liquor.

With sadness he later tells Hildy that "I don't think he's coming back".....The words had popped out of his mouth before he was aware he was even thinking them.... He felt a big ache inside him, something he knew would be with him for a long time."

Anthony then decides he wants to live with the Diamonds for as long as they want him.

Pulga by S. R. Van Iterson tells about a boy who lives in Bogota, Colombia, in a section of town where "The badly paved, narrow street smelled of garbage." His home is ".. where long ago one of the first families of Bogota had lived. Now every room was occuped by a whole family. Most of the families had many children and sometimes included relatives." Pulga lives there with his grandmother, two younger sisters, and a young brother who is lame. "One of his feet was badly twisted He walked almost on his ankle." Neighbors exploit the crippled brother who "brings in money with that paw of his." He is used in front of movie houses to beg. "At first they had let (him) share the earnings but as time went on that share had dwindled. (He) could not stand up against (the neighbor), and when Pulga tried to say something, there was hell to pay. That's how things were." An undercurrent of resignation appears often as the story progresses.

Pulga's "..mother had died after the birth of his youngest sister, and then his father had stopped coming home altogether." Pulga "usually spent much of his time trying to earn a few pennies as a car watcher." Pulga means "flea" in Spanish, and he got this name because of his size. He thought he was about 14 or 15, but he wasn't sure.

Pulga leaves his family to become a helper to a trucker, where he'll most likely get some meals and some wages. Helpers are useful in watching trucks so cargo is safe. However, bandits on highways can be ruthless, despite safeguards taken by owners of trucks. But a dangerous trip is better than the slums for Pulga, even if he doesn't know when, or if, he'll ever return home again.

On one long trip, the trucker notes that Pulga lags behind. "The pavement is so hot..I get stuck in the asphalt. My feet are getting burned."

The trucker buys him tennis shoes, which are later stolen by another poor boy. "For the first time in his life Pulga could not resign himself to accepting what came to him. He always had let events take their course, without resistance, always been ready to submit, always the victim.... Now, for the first time, he found himself in revolt against fate...something had awakened in him. There came a vague awareness of his own worth, a dim notion that he was good for something, that he could be of use."

Pulga's story is stark and shocking, yet ends on the whisper of hope for his future.

Margaret, in A Dance to Still Music by Barbara Corcoran must cope with incurable deafness resulting from illness, feelings of rejection, and a poor self-concept.

Margaret and her mother live in Key West, Florida, lured there from their native Maine by the promise of a good job which never materializes for Margaret's mother, leaving the woman irritated and moody. Margaret, originally a good student who enjoyed piano lessons, skating parties and friends, has changed as the result of deafness. She refuses to go to a school for the deaf--or to any school, for that matter. When her mother decides to marry, a school for the deaf becomes inevitable for Margaret, so she decides to run away and get back to Maine. On her first morning out, the gril stops to help an injured deer and meets Josie, a woman who helps turn Margaret's life around.

The author helps us see inside Margaret, her feelings of resentment and frustration about her handicap, her feeling of loss of worth and usefulness. With Josie, who lets Margaret be herself, who doesn't pressure the girl or ply her with questions, Margaret begins to relax and regain an interest in life and the living of it. In gratitude for Josie's kindness

in taking her in, Margaret wants to do something for her and, along with nursing the injured deer back to health, develops a will and a purpose. She has found a direction for her life and contacts her mother, who, with her new husband, comes to see Margaret. After the visit and hearing of a plan for Margaret to go to the University to participate in a project for the deaf, the mother agrees to allow Margaret to stay with Josie and follow her plan.

> Suddnely Margaret's mother turned and said impatiently, "All right, all right." She came over to Margaret. "Go ahead. But I want a report once a month. You hear me?"
>
> Margaret nodded. The relief was so great, she thought she would fall over. So unexpected..."Yes, Mother. Once a month."
>
> Her mother turned to Josie and talked hard and fast, frowning. Josie listened and nodded. Big Ed shook hands with Josie. Margaret's mother did not. She gave Margaret a kiss on the cheek, her eyes filled with tears once more, and she marched off.... Ed aimed a kiss at the top of Margaret's head and missed. He grinned and said something, shook hands with Josie again, and followed his wife. Margaret watched them out of sight. Ed turned once and waved, but her mother never turned. It was always hard for her mother to give in.

We observe and enjoy the growth that Margaret has experienced as a result of running away and finding herself. In essence, we see that one cannot actually run away from a handicap, but must face it head on and deal with it.

Blubber by Judy Blume describes children's cruelty to each other. A fifth grade class, egged on by Wendy, the class leader, taunts, ridicules, and makes fun of one girl whom they cruelly name Blubber. When one of the class, Jill, disobeys the class leader, Jill, too, learns what it is like to be an outcast.

The following passages suggest that peer relationships can generate truly magic circumstances:

> School isn't as boring as it used to be. Wendy and Caroline made copies of their How to Have Fun with Blubber list and on Monday morning they passed them out.
>
> We made Linda say, "I am Blubber, the smelly whale of class 206." We made her say it before she could use the toilet in the Girls' Room, before she could get a drink at the fountain, before she ate her lunch and before she got on the bus to go home. It was easy to get her to do it. I think she would have done anything we said. There are some people who just make you want to see how far you can go.
>
> On Friday, Wendy brought a small piece of chocolate to school, wrapped in gold foil. It came from a box of Barricini's somebody had brought her mother. Wendy showed it to Linda after lunch. "My father had to go all the way to New York for this chocolate-covered ant," she said.
>
> All of us gathered around Linda's desk. Wendy unwrapped the chocolate. She held it close to Linda's face. "You're going to eat this ant, Blubber."
>
> "No I'm not...and you can't make me," Linda said.
>
> "Want to bet?" Wendy asked.
>
> "I could get sick and die and then you'd be in big trouble."
>
> "I'm willing to take that chance," Wendy told her.
>
> Linda mashed her lips together and moved her head from side to side, all the time making noises that sounded like she was smothering to death.
>
> Wendy handed me the candy. Then she said, "Grab her hands, Caroline."
>
> It's good that Caroline's so strong because Linda was really wiggling around. Once Caroline had Linda's hands behind her back Wendy pinched Linda's nose which made her open her mouth. As soon as she did I shoved in the chocolate.
>
> "Now chew and swallow!" Wendy told her, putting one hand over Linda's mouth so she couldn't spit anything out.

> Linda kept her eyes shut and we could see her chewing, then swallowing the candy. Wendy let go of her then and sang, "Blubber ate an ant...Blubber ate an ant..."
>
> We all joined in, making a circle around Linda. Even Rochelle, who usually doesn't pay any attention to the rest of us, was enjoying the show.

By contrast, Squib's friends in Squib by Nina Bowden discover how he is mistreated by an adult and come to his rescue.

Kate, Robin, Sammy, and Prue often play with the frail little boy they meet in the park. Kate is especially drawn to Squib because of his resemblance to her brother who has drowned. When the children do not find him in the park, they search for him. Several adventures occur climaxing when the children find Squib in the hands of his "auntie" who keeps him strapped in a laundry basket and treats him like a puppy.

In this passage, Squib is found by Robin:

> The mess inside! thought Robin. Bent cooking pots, broken china, one bunk dragged away from the wall, hanging lopsided. The woman was half sitting, half lying across it, her head thrown back. For one heart-thumping second, Robin thought she was dead, her neck broken, but then she began to struggle up and he saw blood pour from her nose. She gasped and fell back again, pressing a cloth to her face. He thought she muttered, "Get out," but she was in no state to make him. His pulse slowed down and he looked around almost calm suddenly. The laundry basket was under the table. He whispered, "Squib!" and dragged it out. He tore open the strp that fastened the lid and saw him, scrouged up at one end, his pale, cottony head drooping forward. He whimpered and screwed up tighter as Robin touched him, but this was no time for coaxing; Robin bent and gathered him up in a ball. He felt horribly light---all bones, Robin thought, like a big, dead bird he'd once found on a beach.

As a result of the loving concern of other, Squib is finally put in the custody of responsible adults.

Because the study of tragic themes is inherently depressing, I have closed this investigation with a book that is substantially hopeful. None of the stories reviewed exist to teach lessons or modify reader behavior. They are, instead, "literary expressions of the tragic sense of life, probing the nature of man and illumining dark facets of experience."[6] It is to be hoped that the tragic elements discernible in the best of children's books, those of today and tomorrow, will serve to evoke the compassion of the young, and suggest to them positive resolutions to prevailing problems of the human condition. Whether we like it or not, the implications seem clear: the movement to protect children in their literature from life's tragedies is over, doubtless forever.

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